



Muṇḍakopaniṣad



(continued from last issue)

Muṇḍaka means head. There are reasons why this upaniṣad is called Muṇḍaka. One reason is this: there is a ritual in *Atharvaveda* called *śirovrata*, in which the student ceremonially carries a fire pot on his head when he is approaching the teacher. The idea conveyed here is that one should approach this upaniṣad with a burning desire to gain the knowledge, just as a person whose hair has caught fire rushes to put out the fire, and does everything with a sense of urgency.

Another reason is, it is studied by *sannyāsins*. Muṇḍana is the removal of the hair on the head and all other *lingas* of the *grhastha*, householder. The tuft that a person has on his head in *grhastāśrama* and the *upavīta*, the sacred thread, that he wears across the body are removed while taking to *sannyāsa*, indicating the giving up of all rituals. Because this knowledge implies freedom from the sense of doership, people take to *sannyāsa* for gaining this knowledge. Muṇḍana, shaven head, being the characteristic of a *sannyāsin*, this upaniṣad, meant for *sannyāsins*, is called Muṇḍakopaniṣad. The disposition of a *sannyāsin* is necessary to understand the *śāstra*.

The upaniṣad starts with a story in order to introduce the tradition of learning. How do you get this knowledge? For gaining

any knowledge or skill there is a method. One has to undergo training; one has to practise and so on. What is to be done here for gaining this knowledge? Can I read the text myself? I know the language. I can just put things together. No, one cannot study independently. The words are to be wielded properly. They are full of paradoxes. A teacher of Vedanta knows how to handle these paradoxes and unfold the meaning of the words. Therefore, one has to study with the help of a teacher. In order to introduce this tradition of learning from a teacher, we have a story. The upaniṣad itself has to tell us these things.

Sage Śaunaka goes to Aṅgiras seeking *brahma-vidyā* and Aṅgiras teaches him. So, Muṇḍakopaniṣad contains the teaching of Aṅgiras to Śaunaka. At the outset the upaniṣad mentions the line of teachers who initiated the teaching of this upaniṣad. In this line of teachers, a few names have been mentioned such as Brahmā, Atharvā, Aṅgīr and Satyavāha.

Here Śaṅkara poses a question by implication as to whether these teachers created this upaniṣad, self-knowledge. Then he himself answers that nobody created the upaniṣads. Nobody creates knowledge. Knowledge always is. Since we look upon the Veda as something that is given by Īśvara, it is not created by anybody. It is

'given'. The word 'given' can be taken all the way. Really speaking, everything is from Īsavara. Everything is given—the body is given, mind is given, senses are given, powers are given, all resources are given, knowledge also is given, the possibility to gain knowledge is given, one's capacity to know is given, ignorance also is given. Where there is the possibility of knowledge, there is the possibility of ignorance and of error. Where there is the possibility of error, there is the possibility of many religious theologies. Therefore, there is the possibility of confusion. *Andha-paramparā*, the blind leading the blind is also a possibility.

Knowledge that is 'given' cannot be gained just like that. One has to get it only through a means of knowledge. To gain knowledge, the means of knowledge such as perception and inference are given. If both are inadequate, or more than inadequate for Brahma vidyā, and hence inappropriate, then one does require another means of knowledge known as śabda; that also is given. All things that are here are given. In general everything is given. When everything is given, then we can say, this knowledge also is 'given'. This is the general sense of the word 'given'.

But we do not stop at the 'general sense' alone. If we have to accept the tradition, then we have to accept both the general sense and the particular sense for the word 'given'. So, this knowledge is given in 'particular sense' also, that is, it is revealed to the ṛṣis¹, sages. The one who did not get

the knowledge from his contemporaries is called ṛṣi. Then from whom did he get it? Īsavara revealed this knowledge in the form of word to the ṛṣis.

In Kenopniṣad, Śruti herself reveals Brahman to the *devas*. The *devas* were rejoicing, proud of defeating the *asuras*, demons, in a battle, taking the entire credit for it. Brahman wanted to correct their thinking and appeared in the form of a yakṣa² in front of them at a distance. The *devas* wanted to know who the yakṣa was; they could not. The yakṣa did not introduce himself at all. Indra could not even get an audience. Then there appeared a deity in a female form who introduced the yakṣa to Indra. She was none other than Śruti. Śruti has to introduce Brahman, because Brahman is the *vastu* to be known, and Brahman is not going to introduce itself, 'I am Brahman'. Brahman is not totally unknown inasmuch as it is ātman, oneself. Ātman is both known and unknown. Being self-evident, it is known in the form of self-awareness, or 'I'. But the nature of this 'I' is not known, and it is therefore mistaken for a limited being. Brahman, the limitless cannot reveal itself any more than it is revealed right now. Hence, we require someone else to introduce Brahman to us as ourselves. Śruti introduces us to ourselves.

Śruti is in the form of words. Through the words alone Śruti has to reveal Brahman. So, there is a necessity for an instrument of knowing, for us. Īsavara being sarvajña, all knowledge, does not require to operate a

¹ ऋषति जानाति इति ऋषिः

² Yakṣa is a divine luminous being.

means of knowledge to know. He does not come to know everything gradually, by removing the ignorance bit by bit. If that is so, there is no way of arriving at 'all knowledge'. Therefore, without the necessity for a mind to know, Īśavara knows everything at once. So, the knowledge on the part of Īśavara is not gained through *karāṇa*. *Karāṇa* means a faculty and a faculty implies ignorance. Total elimination of ignorance is not possible. One can eliminate ignorance about a few things only. Even with respect to those few things, one can remove only a part of the ignorance as in the case of a rose flower. One knows a given flower as a rose and knows that it is red. That is all. One does not know anything more of it. If one has some knowledge of Botany, then one will give a botanical name for it. That means one knows the genus, one knows to which family it belongs. Just as we have a family name, it has a family name. That does not mean everything about the flower is known. If Īśavara also needs a mind to know, he will be like one of us. If He does not require a mind, then either He will not know at all or He knows all. Being Īśavara, He knows all; He knows without requiring a mind.

Śāstrā talks about Īśavara as one who knows everything in general and in particular. To understand what Śāstrā says about Īśavara, we can take the help of certain reasoning also. If Īśavara is the creator of the *jagat*, universe, He must have the knowledge of the *jagat*. In fact, His knowledge alone is in the form of *jagat*, as our knowledge is for us in our dream. One has direct or indirect knowledge of what one has created in the dream. Otherwise one would not see it in

the dream. The knowledgeable person creates a dream world out of himself. In fact, it is the knowledge of the dreamer, which is in the form of the dream world.

In the dreamer's head alone remains the 'knowledge of the dream world' as well as the 'dream world'. The dreamer is the space there, he is the time there, he is in the form of people there who are talking about everything, and he is all the knowledge there. If one gets into Īśavara's 'head', this is how it will be. Īśavara's knowledge alone is in the form of this world. We are dividing this world into insentient and sentient, like in a dream there is a mountain that is insentient, and there is a sentient mountain lion also. These differences—sentient and insentient—exist within the dream. From the standpoint of Īśavara, nothing is separate from His knowledge. Therefore, it is Īśavara's knowledge alone that is manifest in the form of *jagat*.

Any knowledge belongs to only Īśavara. Knowledge itself is Īśavara; it is not separate from Īśavara. Therefore, knowledge is 'generally given'. It is also 'specially given' to the ṛṣis in the form of the words of scripture. Words need not be in Sanskrit alone. It can be words of any language that contain this knowledge. So, the ṛṣis mentioned here are not *pramāṇa kartṛs*, creators of *pramāṇa* in the form of words. *Brahma vidhyā* in the form of words and their meaning is 'given'. The ṛṣis are purely *sampradāya kartṛs*, those who perpetuate the *sampradāya*, the method of handling the words of śruti. A particular lineage is mentioned here that initiated and maintained the *sampradāya*.

(To be continued)